

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

By Rev. Langton D.Fox D.D.

THE doctrine of the Immaculate Conception does not refer to the moment when Our Lady conceived Our Blessed Lord, but to the moment in which she herself was conceived by her mother, St. Anne. Nor does it suggest that Mary's coming into being was physically in any way an exception to the ordinary laws of nature. What it does tell us is this: that even at that first moment of her conception, by which is meant the very first instant of Our Lady's existence as a human individual, she was (by God's favour granted in anticipation of the merits of her Son) preserved from all stain of Original sin. But this is to plunge into the midst of the doctrine. The aim of this pamphlet is rather to see this doctrine (and the justification of it) in its setting, as part of the whole plan of God for our redemption.

God

May we, then, start with a word about God? There is no need to say much, but because we are going to use His name so frequently in the paragraphs that follow, particularly when we shall refer to Our Blessed Lady as the Mother of God, it is, I think desirable to say a little.

Briefly then, our reason shows us that there must be, and is, one Supreme Being upon whom everything else entirely depends, even for its very existence. It is this Supreme Being that we call 'God'. As to what God is like, reason, starting from His being the Maker and Supporter of all, and applying the principle that no one can give what he does not possess, can come to the easy but tremendous conclusion that God Himself possesses all the power that we admire in creation, all the beauty and goodness that stirs our hearts to love when we find it in the people and things He holds in existence. It is not difficult to show also that He possesses those qualities without any limitation or shadow of imperfection. He is, then, Beauty and Goodness and Power without limit. This much reason can tell us about Him.

God Himself has told us more. He has told us some facts about His own inner life which reason could never discover, but which also have a bearing on what we are going to say. He has told us that the boundless Purity and Power which is the Godhead belongs to three distinct Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and belongs to them in such a way that each possesses the whole Godhead fully, and is therefore wholly and fully God: wholly and fully one and the same God. He has also told us (and this is most important for our purpose here), that the Second Person, one of the Three who are truly God, while remaining fully God, has become also a human being. So that in this Person two distinct things, Godhead and manhood, are joined. Both belong to the same Person. That Person is Jesus Christ. He can say, 'I am God: one and the same God with the Father and the Holy Ghost.' He, the very same Person, Jesus Christ, can also say, 'I am a man: I have a human body and a human soul. I was born of a woman.' For the truth of all this God gives His word.

Mary is the Mother of God

Let us think about Jesus Christ. He is wholly and fully God: yet He has a human body and soul. That is a fact. It is another fact that He was born of a woman. This is a new fact, for the human body and soul which belong to God the Son might have been produced for Him out of nothing. But that would not have met so well the special purpose of His becoming man. This was to make atonement for the offences of this human race to which you and I belong. In order to make atonement for us, He wanted to become a member of our family, He wanted to be of the same stock as each of us. Therefore He chose to take His origin as a human being from a woman, a descendant of Adam. He chose Mary, the Virgin of Nazareth, to be that woman. It was her tremendous privilege that His human body should be formed from hers: not just in hers, or through hers, but from hers. We must grasp the full force of this. In her relation to Him she is not like an aqueduct, which simply conveys what it does not produce, but like a spring, which itself produces what it offers to the world. He became a man by being conceived in her womb by the overshadowing power of the Most High. Thereafter she contributed to His development and growth all that any mother contributes to the development and growth of her son. After nine months bearing Him in her womb she brought Him forth, and fed Him at her breast. In a word, she is His

mother.

She is the Mother of Jesus Christ. And who is He? There is only one Person in Jesus Christ, the Person of God the Son. She is the Mother of God. He whom she wrapped in swaddling clothes is He whose providence even then was ruling the course of the furthest stars. He is God, the all-powerful, the all-beautiful: and she, the Mother of God.

She is Mother of God. We must dwell on that fact. It is all-important. It is no verbal trick. It is the plain consequence of the other fact that her Son is one Person, one of the Three Persons, Each of whom is the one God. She gave Him His body, formed from her own. If He were a human person, she would be the mother of that human person. But this living body of His was never possessed by a human person. From the first moment of its existence it was the body and soul of the Son of God. To repeat just once more the crucial point: there is only one Person in Christ and she is His Mother. Because that Person is God, she is the Mother of God.

That is the literal truth. We have found it contained in the basic doctrines of Christianity. That our analysis of them is correct was guaranteed by the Council of Ephesus which, in the year 431, proclaimed under the safeguard of infallibility, that the fact that Mary is Mother of God is part of God's message to us. This message we are clearly under an obligation to accept. If we did not, we would be refusing to believe something for which God gives His word. Mary is His mother then. Think what that implies. It means for one thing that the relationship that Mary enjoys with God is that relationship of affection and intimacy which exists between mother and son. All the consequences of that relationship also apply between God and Mary. For one thing, God's honour is inseparably bound up with hers. The honour or disgrace of a mother inescapably affects her son. If she is honoured, so is he. If she is disgraced, so is he. Mary, then, must be raised to every dignity that befits the Mother of God. Besides, God is wise and just. He never calls anyone to a post in His service without offering them all they need in order to be able to be what He wants them to be, effectively and well. Mary He chose to be His Mother. To her therefore He will have given all the gifts necessary to make her fit to be God's Mother.

She is sinless

What are these splendid gifts, the gifts necessary to make a human creature fit to be the Mother of God? Many of them must be beyond our comprehension. But one is easily understandable, and it is the one that concerns us here. It seems an elementary one: she must be free from sin. It does not seem much to claim for the Mother of God, but we must dwell upon it, for it is directly on our subject. If God makes Mary His Mother, He must make her sinless. Why? Because if a mother's honour is an honour to her son, and her disgrace is also his, then, were Mary to have incurred even the slightest sin, the slur of it would have passed to her Son. The All-Holy God would have incurred the slur of sin! It is unthinkable! Imagine men being able to point to God-made-man and allege with truth that His Mother had been a sinner! No! His own honour was at stake. It could not be. She must be sinless.

What of Original sin

Thus far we have not been making distinctions among sins. But now we must make an important distinction: that between what is called 'Actual' sin, and what is called 'Original' sin. The need for the distinction will appear as we make it. Actual sin is sin in the ordinary sense of the word: any thought, word or action against the law of God. We ourselves are responsible for it by our own personal decision to commit it.

Original sin is the offence which was committed by Adam, the first man, from whom we are all descended. Adam was responsible for this sin as we are responsible for our own Actual sins. We are obviously not responsible for this sin of Adam by reason of any personal decision on our part. But nevertheless we do incur it because we are responsible for it in a different way: by reason of our relationship with Adam as father and head of the human race. He made a decision to displease God. In a way that was his business. In another it was ours, because he was our head. It is because he was our head that we are committed by his decision, committed to a condition which is displeasing to God.

What precisely makes up this condition displeasing to God? Substantially, the lack of gifts which God intended us to have. It was God's intention that from the first moment of our existence we should enjoy several splendid gifts quite

above the power of human nature to develop for itself. The greatest of them was a gift of a share in God's own life. But this was to be given us on the condition that the head of our race should use his freedom to acknowledge his dependence upon God. Because he chose to do the opposite we are all born already suffering from the lack of the gifts that God designed for us. This lack, which of itself could evoke only pity from the heart of God, actually evokes displeasure because it is a lack for which, through Adam our head, we are responsible. We lack a share in God's life because we are the children of one who, at the suggestion of the devil, rebelled against God.

We are like people who are descendants of a man once honoured, favoured and made wealthy by his king, but who find themselves born in poverty and without honour or favour, because their ancestor turned traitor. We are born without the wealth and honour God intended us to have. Nor is our poverty just a misfortune. It is a disgrace. It carries with it the stigma of the crime of which it is the consequence. It is the result of the treacherous conduct of the man from whom we are descended, and although we had no say in what he did, by the laws of human solidarity we cannot escape being involved in what he did.

Now, was Our Lady free from Original sin? On the one hand it would seem to be already established that she was, for we have seen how her vocation demands that she must be without sin. Original sin is sin. As effectively as Actual sin it deprives the soul of the share in God's own life and happiness which He desires it to have, and the responsibility for the lack is (in however subtle a way) ours. So it is sin. Mary therefore must be ever free of it. But on the other hand Original sin is so very different from Actual sin that before we finally decide that Mary's sinlessness always excluded Original sin (this is precisely the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception), it is only right that we should carefully examine our reasons for doing so, and make sure that they do apply to Original sin. After all, a person could be said to be (and proved to be) 'sinless' in a way if, even though she had once incurred Original sin, she were free from all Actual sin. So let us face the question: Does Mary's sinlessness mean that she never incurred even Original sin?

The argument from her destiny

Does her destiny to be the Mother of God demand the exclusion from her soul of Original sin? It is hard to see how anyone could maintain that it does not, for even Original sin is sin, and is a state displeasing to God. So how could Mary be said to have been made fit to stand in the relationship of Mother to the all-pure God if the devil could claim, and claim truly, that once, even if only for a moment, she had been in the state of Original sin? Admittedly it is not so revolting a thought as the thought of Actual sin in the Mother of God, but surely it is revolting enough to make us sure that God would never have allowed it to be realised. Every mind that has even the vaguest appreciation of the repugnance of God to sin will see at once that God would preserve His Mother from even Original sin. If she incurred it, even for a moment, it would come too blasphemously close to Him. From the first moment of her existence as a human individual, she must have been preserved from it, that is to say, she must have been conceived immaculate.

This is an important stage in our enquiry. We have come to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. We have found it simply by putting together and reflecting upon some of the basic truths of God's revelation to us through Christ. But we must not leave the matter there. The doctrine of our Mother's complete preservation from Original sin is too important to be left resting upon the basis we have already found it to have. We must see how the truth of our theological reasoning is guaranteed for us by Scripture and Tradition.

SCRIPTURE is made up of the books of the Bible. Of these God is the principal Author, using a human author as His instrument in writing them. It is He therefore who vouches for the truth of what we read there.

TRADITION is the unwritten word of God, taught in every age of Christian history by the Pope and the Bishops, and handed down by them to the age which follows. It originated with Christ and His Holy Spirit, who gave it to the Apostles. At every stage, whether it is a question of its being expounded or handed down, it is under God's guarantee that no error will be introduced into it. Scripture and Tradition then can be thought of as the storehouses of the information God has been pleased to give us. Let us check our conclusion that Mary never for one moment incurred Original sin, against what is there contained.

Tradition and the Immaculate Conception

As regards Tradition we can settle the whole matter at once by pointing to the declarations of later Popes, and supremely to the definition of the doctrine in 1854. In the official history of the pontificate of Pope Pius IX we read that on the 8th December, 1854, in St. Peter's at Rome, in the presence of a vast gathering of Cardinals and Bishops, the Pope solemnly declared and defined:

‘That the teaching which says that in the first moment of her conception the most blessed Virgin Mary was, by a unique favour and privilege of God Almighty, in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from every stain of Original sin, is revealed by God and therefore must be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful.’

The wording is plain. ‘In the first moment of her conception’, that is, in the first moment of her existence as a human individual, she was ‘preserved immune from every stain of Original sin’. Never for one single moment was she touched by it. And that, so we are assured under the safeguard of Christ's promise of infallibility, is part of the message entrusted by God to His Church for us to accept because He asserts it. With the whole Catholic world we rejoice and believe. Rome has spoken. The truth of our conclusion is beyond doubt.

It is still, however, fascinating for us (and perhaps helpful to some who suspect that the doctrine is new in itself and not simply in the clarity of its expression), to look back to early Tradition. By early Tradition I mean the doctrine of Christ as it was expounded by the Catholic Bishops of the first six or seven centuries. To estimate what the teaching was in those now remote centuries we accept the evidence of the learned and saintly writers and preachers of that time whose words have come down to us. These men are referred to as the ‘Fathers of the Church’, and they are universally accepted as witnesses to the Tradition as it was taught in their day.

Of the sinlessness of Mary many of these Fathers speak with lyrical enthusiasm, and as they sing the praises of Mary we see shining through their words their clear conviction that she is immaculate, untainted by any sin whatsoever. They compare her to the Ark of Noe, designed by God to remain safe and unharmed by the flood of sin which overwhelms the rest of mankind. For them, she is like the tower hung about with a thousand shields, unassailable by the enemy: or like the walled garden which nothing can violate, nor any evil spoil. She is the lily among briars; the flawless paradise of innocence planted by God Himself and defended by Him from all the wiles of the serpent; the tree which never suffers the decay of sin; the ever-limpid fount, scaled by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Surely the men who wrote these words believed Mary to have been preserved from every form of sin. The ark is completely safe and unharmed. The tower is simply unassailable. The walled garden nothing can violate. There is no reservation about the purity of the lily. The tree is never decayed, the fount ever-limpid. There is no hint in these passages of an exception such as in all honesty there would have to have been if Mary's soul was thought to have been besmirched with Original sin.

But if any doubts remain there is another comparison, and it is one to which these saintly and learned writers constantly return. It brings the mind very close to the thought of Original sin and therefore to the expression of any reservation concerning it in connection with the sinlessness of Mary. It is the comparison of Mary with Eve, the first woman. Yet when this comparison is made, not only is no exception from what has been said of Mary's spotless innocence so much as suggested, but she is declared positively to be like Eve as she was in her innocence, before there was any such thing as Original sin. ‘Mary and Eve were both innocent,’ wrote St. Ephraim, ‘both without guile, for they were made absolutely equal to one another. It was afterwards that one became the cause of death, the other of our life.’ Eve became the cause of death by sharing with Adam the guilt of Original sin. Mary was made ‘absolutely equal’ to her as she was before that sin was ever committed. The conclusion is obvious. Her freedom from sin is a freedom from even Original sin. It is like the innocence of her Divine Son. ‘Thou and Thy Mother alone are in every way entirely beautiful. There is no blemish in Thee, O Lord, nor in Thy Mother any stain.’ Is it possible to doubt that the men who wrote like this and those who received their faith through them were entirely convinced that Mary never for one moment incurred the stain of Original sin?

Scripture and the Immaculate Conception

Turning to Scripture, we find two principal passages to our purpose. The first is called the Proto-evangelion. It consists of the words of God to the devil when he has been convicted of leading the original human pair into sin. He is told (Gen. 3: 15) that as a punishment for his crime, God will set up a state of war between him and the Woman, between her offspring and his. This war will result in a crushing defeat for him. Now who are the Woman and her offspring? On purely scriptural grounds it can be shown to be most probable that they are Mary and her Divine Son. But if we are willing to let the voice of Tradition be heard in the interpretation of Scripture, that probability is turned into reasonable certainty. And we should, of course, listen to Tradition in such a matter. Scripture and Tradition, being the twin storehouses of God's revelation, are not to be kept rigorously apart. It is manifestly the function of Tradition to tell us which writings make up the Bible, and to assure us that God is its Author. How else should we know? It is also its function to guide us, when need be, in the interpretation of what we read there.

Now Tradition gives us this guidance, that the Fathers who identify the Woman of the Proto-evangelion as Mary the Mother of Christ are sufficiently numerous to make us certain that this is a true interpretation and that it is she who is linked with her Son in hostility to Satan. God's words then must be applied with their full weight to Mary. But if they are to be always true of Mary, then she must never be in Satan's camp by being in a state displeasing to God, even an inherited state. She must always be free of even Original sin.

God speaks also of the crushing of the serpent's head. Thus He describes the triumph of the Woman and her Son over the devil. His head is to be crushed. Does that not mean that the triumph over him is to be complete and perfect? It would not be if by her incurring Original sin even for one moment, he could claim the Woman as his victim.

Of course all this turns upon the point that God does mean that the hostility of the Woman towards Satan is to be absolutely perpetual, and that her triumph over him is to be absolute as well. God's words will certainly bear that sense, and that it is a correct understanding of them is underlined by the fact that He groups the hostility and triumph of the Woman together with the hostility and triumph of Him who is 'the seed of the Woman', Christ Himself. Now His hostility most certainly is absolutely perpetual. His triumph is fully perfect. They manifestly include the total exclusion of Original sin. It is this triumph that Mary shares.

Finally, the occasion of God's speech and the purpose of it encourage us to give His words their full weight. His purpose in this passage is to pass sentence upon a criminal. It is justifiable to give their fullest weight to the words of any judge when he passes sentence: much more so when it is God who judges. As to the occasion, that further supports us. The effect of our giving full weight to God's words is to find in them the implication that Mary was ever free of Original sin, and the occasion of His words was precisely that of assigning blame and punishment for having caused Original sin. To speak humanly, it was the occasion when God had Original sin uppermost in His mind. We can, therefore, feel confident that we are not going beyond His intention when we find an implication concerning Original sin in the hostility He foretells between the Woman and the serpent.

In the New Testament there is similar evidence in the form of two titles addressed to Our Lady. It is best to take them together. They are both to be found in the same first chapter of St. Luke (vv. 28 and 42), and they are closely linked in sense. The first comes from the Archangel Gabriel. Speaking as God's messenger to Mary, he calls her 'full of grace', or 'perfected in grace'. This is a unique title: a form of salutation which is never addressed to anyone else in Scripture. What can be implied by addressing it to Mary alone? Surely that the quality of which it speaks belongs to her in a unique way. This uniqueness of her distinction is emphasised by the other salutation, which comes from her cousin Elizabeth: 'filled with the Holy Ghost.' Thus inspired, she hailed Our Lady: 'Blessed art thou among women.' Hearing this we gather, as we gathered from the Archangel, that Mary has some blessing that is unique among womankind. What is this blessing? 'Blessed', says Elizabeth. 'Full of grace', says the Archangel. What does it mean? The sacred text offers no explanation.

We turn to Tradition, and at once we are overwhelmed with assurances. It means that Mary is made perfect in that gift of God which is nothing less than a share in the life of God Himself. Mary is made perfect in this. So perfect that Elizabeth goes on, in the spirit of the Proto-evangelion, to link her in her blessedness with her Divine Son Himself.

‘Blessed art thou among women,’ she says, ‘and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.’ And this quality in which she is made perfect, so uniquely perfect as to be associated with the peerless perfection of her Son, is of all qualities that which of its nature is most diametrically opposed to sin. Mary is thus perfect in this. Is she so perfect in it as to be without even Original sin, and that even from the first moment of her existence?

If the words of Scripture are to be given their full weight, yes. Otherwise her perfection would not be complete, nor could Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Ghost, link it with that of her Divine Son. Nor again would it be unique. Apparently St. John the Baptist, having incurred Original sin, was freed from it even before his birth. God promised his father that he should ‘be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb’. If Mary’s privilege then was truly unique, and her perfection truly complete and truly comparable with that of her Son, then it must have been that she never incurred Original sin at all, but was conceived immaculate.

The ‘development’ of the doctrine

It remains only to add a word about the history of the Church’s progress from implicit to explicit recognition of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. At the beginning, as soon as God’s message was examined to discover what it contained about Our Blessed Lady, it was generally seen that it implied that she was sinless. The only clear and positive evidence of its being appreciated in the early centuries that her sinlessness was so perfect that it meant the exclusion of even Original sin from her soul is the way in which that sinlessness is compared with that of Eve before the fall. It was left to the Middle Ages to consider the point explicitly. It then happened that a number of learned theologians, and even a few great ones, thought that Mary must have incurred Original sin at least for just the one first moment of her existence. It was possible for this mistake to be made because of the way in which the doctrine had remained hitherto almost entirely implicit in the faith of the Church. The theologians who slipped into the error were preoccupied with the truth that absolutely everybody who is pleasing to God is so only because they have been redeemed by Christ. They came to their false conclusion by making the erroneous deduction that if Our Lady were conceived immaculate she would not have been redeemed by Christ.

To the everlasting glory of our country, it was in England that the faith was vindicated and the fallacious argument against it dissolved. Men like Eadmer of Canterbury, Anselm of Bury St. Edmunds and Osbert of Westminster strenuously defended the doctrine. It was the great Franciscan, Duns Scotus, who in his lectures at Oxford showed that the fact that all are dependent upon the redemption of Christ in no way contradicted the fact of the Immaculate Conception. Our Lady was preserved from Original sin by the merits of her Son, as we are released from it by the same merits. He is her redeemer as well as ours: in fact, more perfectly hers than ours, for she is redeemed more perfectly who is shielded by Him from ever incurring evil, than we who are released by Him from the evil He has permitted us to incur.

The Church rejoiced in the vindication of her faith, and from that day the history of the doctrine has been the history of an ever clearer and more universal realisation, and ever more triumphant assertion that it has always been part of the revelation confided by God to the Universal Church that Mary was conceived immaculate.

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us, who have recourse to thee.
